



# Health Literacy Matters

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## **What is Health Literacy?**

Health literacy is the ability to comprehend written and verbal information in a healthcare setting. Health literacy depends in large part on a person's general literacy and numeracy skills. Some factors that influence literacy and numeracy include educational background, being a native speaker of a language, learning or cognitive difficulties, and exposure to the subject matter.

## **Why is Health Literacy important?**

A patient's health literacy level can have major impacts on their ability and willingness to engage with the healthcare system. While the average person in the United States reads at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, much of the information presented in a healthcare setting is at a 10<sup>th</sup> grade level or above. Many patients who are not confident readers are shy to ask questions of healthcare providers. Some may feel uncomfortably aware of their own lack of education when faced with a conversation with a doctor or nurse. Some may also simply feel overwhelmed by the type of information they are receiving; a frightening diagnosis might be so emotionally distracting that patients do not hear any other information.

## **What is the worst that can happen if limited health literacy is not addressed?**

Medication errors.

Emergency department visits.

Poor health outcomes for children.

Consent to procedures that are not understood, or even wanted.

Noncompliance with treatment.

Lack of understanding of billing and financial responsibility.

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## **What can healthcare organizations do to address limited health literacy?**

Recognize that patients are reluctant to speak up if they do not understand.

Treat communication failures as an issue of safety.

Offer interpreter services.

Give both written directions and spoken demonstrations.

Involve community members in the design of health information materials.

Use “teach back” methods when providing discussions.

## **How can I learn more?**

[www.healthliteracyne.org](http://www.healthliteracyne.org)

[www.iha4health.org](http://www.iha4health.org)

